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ABSTRACT

In the late 1960's, educators and researchers became concerned with the dropout problem in large urban school districts. In Philadelphia, the Division of Pupil Personnel and Counseling (PPC) is responsible for collection of this data and reports this information to the state. The process has been computerized to cope with the large volume of data. The PPC file has become the basis for annual dropout reports. Four general categories of dropouts have been defined. A survey questionnaire was also developed which indicated differential patterns of dropping out by race, sex and grade, and also shows that many dropouts continue their education on a part-time basis or through the GED program. There has been an overall decline in the dropout rate over the last five years, although the majority of dropouts leave school because they are over-aged. The survey reveals differences in official records and personal reasons for leaving, however. Each time the study is conducted, 50% report unemployment, suggesting that new approaches are required to solve problems of unskilled teenage employment. The appendix includes dropout statistical tables and status surveys. (Author/BEF)

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URBAN SCHOOL DROPOUTS: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS IN PHILADELPHIA

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BACKGROUND

In the late nineteen sixties educators and researchers were becoming increasingly concerned with the "dropout problem", particularly in large urban school districts. A number of descriptive studies at the time showed a high incidence of social maladjustment, unemployment, underemployment, and gang-related and other criminal activities among youth who dropped out of school. Around the same time various state and federal agencies also began to exhibit an interest in students who failed to complete high school.

In large urban school systems, the magnitude of the problem was quite great, with thousands of pupils dropping out each year without completing high school. Moreover, within the same school district, wide variations could be seen in both the number of dropouts and the dropout rate from school to school. In the light of these conditions in the early 1970's, the Superintendent of Schools asked the Division of Administrative and Survey Research Services to prepare a report showing the number and distribution of Philadelphia high school dropouts over a period of years.

DATA COLLECTION

In Pennsylvania, all children between the ages of 8 and 17 are required to attend some type of school, either public or non-public. Upon reaching 17, a student may leave school of his

own volition. Each Pennsylvania school district must report to the State Department of Education the number of children who withdrew from its schools and the reason for each withdrawal. The State has established seventeen codes under which all withdrawals from a given school district must be accounted for.

In the School District of Philadelphia the Division of Pupil Personnel and Counseling has the responsibility for collecting and reporting these data to the State. In a large school district like Philadelphia (250,000 pupils, 290 schools) the magnitude of the withdrawals in a given school year is in the tens of thousands. To cope with a data collection and reporting task of this scale the process had been computerized in the early 1970's. A file of nearly 35,000 withdrawals per year had been developed and the necessary reports required by the State were computer generated annually.

The Pupil Personnel and Counseling (PP&C) file became the basis of the first annual dropout report of the Division of Administrative and Survey Research Services (A&SRS) in 1974. For the purposes of this report, specific withdrawal codes were selected to designate pupils as dropouts. Of the seventeen withdrawal codes established by the State, fourteen were selected as constituting a "dropout". These codes were then collapsed into four general categories of dropouts: entered government service (Job Corps or military); obtained employment certificate or exemption permit (under 17); pregnancy; and over

compulsory school age (17 years). Dropout data were then tabulated and the published report presented dropout characteristics for the fourteen specific codes in four general categories by school, grade, race, sex, and reason for leaving school before graduation. Using the same files, comparable analyses can be done over time and across schools and subdistricts within the School District.

The collection and tabulation of dropout information described above was published first in 1974 and provided a time series of four years of comparable data. The procedure has been repeated annually since then. The data contained in these reports serve as an important and useful tool for meeting federal and state reporting requirements and for conducting internal analyses of dropout patterns and differentials within the school system.

While the annual dropout report provided valuable statistical information about the number and characteristics of the dropouts from our system, it lacked an important dimension -- the dropout's perspective. Both the Superintendent and his staff felt that there should be direct input from the dropouts themselves which would complement the data and findings from the statistical report.

THE DROPOUT SURVEY

To this end, a survey instrument was developed which contained questions such as why the pupil dropped out, what factors influenced their decision to leave school, to whom they turned

for advice in making their decision and what they were doing after they dropped out.

The Division of Administrative and Survey Research Services possessed the capabilities to conduct such a survey of dropouts. It had, in fact, conducted a similar survey of Philadelphia high school graduates for several years. The Division also maintains the School District's Pupil Directory file, a pupil based computerized data file which contains selected information on all pupils in the Philadelphia School System. This file represented the vehicle through which individual dropouts could be identified and the survey universe developed.

In 1974, the year the first survey was conducted, there were differences in the number, and to a limited extent the characteristics, of the student records on the Pupil Personnel and Counseling file (the base for the annual statistical reports) and the records on the Pupil Directory file. The PP&C file contained every dropout case handled (9,444 for the 1973-1974 school year). The PDF listed only 5,206 pupils, which represented an unduplicated count of the dropouts reported by the high school offices to the Division of Administrative and Survey Research Services. More of the PP&C dropouts were black and male than those listed in the PDF. However, there was no significant difference between the two data files by sex.

A postcard questionnaire was sent to the entire list of dropouts (5,206 in 1974) on the PDF. Labels on the return address side of the questionnaire contained codes taken directly from the pupil's record which indicated school, grade, race, sex, and recorded reason for leaving school. Analysis of the survey responses by these variables has been published annually since 1975. Similarity in content to the graduate followup survey instrument made comparisons between dropouts and graduates possible and provided the School District with additional pertinent information.

The response rates to the surveys have varied from 24.3% in 1974 to 22% in later years. They have always resembled the universe by race, sex, and distribution by school so that generalizations could be made with confidence from the survey data. Over the years during which the survey of dropouts has been conducted, the PDF count of dropouts has come to more closely approach the count from the PPSC file (increasing from 55% in 1974 to 88% in 1978) and the minor differences that previously existed have disappeared.

Using the data obtained from the survey in conjunction with that contained in the statistical report, a variety of dropout prevention programs were developed and initiated. The School District was also able to refer respondents who expressed a desire to return to school to the appropriate office or individual who could help them. Similarly, many female respondents

who had left school because they were pregnant were referred to the Comprehensive Services for School Age Parents and were subsequently able to complete their education under the program.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDIES

Over the years the data contained in the Dropout Report together with the findings from the surveys of dropouts have provided the School District with valuable insights into the magnitude and nature of the dropout problem in Philadelphia.

The results and findings of the two studies have proved illuminating in several respects. They clearly show differential patterns of dropping out by race, by sex, and by grade. The greatest proportion of Philadelphia dropouts leave school in the tenth grade, blacks drop out at a higher rate than whites, and more boys drop out than girls. Responses to the survey also indicate that a greater proportion of the dropouts were unemployed than was true of high school graduates who entered the labor market at the same time, and of the teenage population as a whole. The results of the survey also show that many pupils who drop out of the Philadelphia Public Schools continue their education, often on a part-time basis or through the GED program.*

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* A diploma given by passing an equivalency test. Preparatory courses are given by the School District and Federal and privately funded programs.

While in absolute terms the number of dropouts is still quite large, 8,572 in the most recent year, both the number of dropouts and the dropout rate have declined sharply over the last five years. Moreover, the rates for black and Hispanic pupils, as well as the rates for whites, declined during this period. While the major categories of dropouts have remained unchanged, the proportion of dropouts in some categories has changed substantially over the years. Five years ago over 20 percent of the dropouts left school before reaching the compulsory school age of 17 by obtaining employment certificates or exemption permits and going to work. In 1977-1978, only 7 percent fell into this category. To a great degree this reflects the deteriorating economic conditions in the region in recent years and the increasing difficulty that unskilled youth have in obtaining employment. Over the same period the percentage of pupils who left school simply as "over age" increased from 79 percent to 86 percent. Moreover, an increasing proportion of pupils in this category are ninth graders. Five years ago only 40 percent of the ninth grade dropouts left school as "over age". In 1977-1978, over 76 percent of the ninth grade dropouts were in this category.

Several factors influenced this changing pattern. In the mid-1970's the School District became concerned over the number of social promotions in the system and, at the same time, instituted programs to enhance basic skills mastery at the elementary level.

In the same year, a competency testing program was initiated at the high school level. The tests were first administered at the twelfth grade level, and then to lower high school grades in the next two succeeding years. Pupils who failed to pass the test by the end of the year were retained in grade for the next school year. Implementation of this policy resulted in an increasing number of pupils reaching their seventeenth birthday while still only in ninth or tenth grade because of retention in grade. Over the last five years the number of pupils retained in the ninth grade nearly doubled and the number in the tenth grade increased by nearly 25 percent. The effect of this is corroborated by the increasing number of respondents to the dropout survey who indicated they decided to drop out because they had been retained in grade, or "left back". In 1973-1974, only 7 percent responded in this manner but by 1977-1978 over 13 percent cited this as their reason for leaving school.

The data obtained through the survey of dropouts provided an additional body of information that complemented the findings of the dropout report and yielded insights into what happens to these youth after they leave school. The survey also highlighted differences between the official recorded reasons for leaving school and the pupil's perceived reason for leaving. The Pupil Directory file contains a specific code which identifies the official reason given by school authorities for the pupil's withdrawal from school. When the recorded reason for

leaving was compared with the survey responses from the dropouts themselves, some important differences were observed. Less than one percent of the recorded drop codes indicated pregnancy as the reason for withdrawing from school. (This may reflect the expanded range of services offered to school age parents and the fact that pregnancy alone is no longer a State recognized reason to leave school). However, pregnancy, marriage and related child care responsibilities were cited by 29 percent of the female respondents as their reason for dropping out of school. Another 20 percent of the respondents indicated that they dropped out because they "didn't like it (school)"; it "was a bore" or "a hassle". There is no official withdrawal code which encompasses such reasons. Most of these dropout respondents were recorded as "over age", "probable employment", or simply "other".

The drop code recorded when the pupil left school and his status at the time of the survey also produced conflicting results. For example, of the dropouts who were serving in the armed forces within a year of leaving school, only a little more than one third had given enlistment as their reason for leaving school. Moreover, only two thirds of those who had been recorded as leaving school to go to work were actually employed at the time of the survey. The survey information pointed up areas of concern about the employment situation of out of school youth that were quite different from those gleaned from the official reporting system.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the two studies in Philadelphia highlighted some important elements of the dropout problem. While the number of dropouts remains high (over 8,000 per year) it has declined substantially throughout the 1970's. The dropout rate declined for minority students as well as for non-minority and declined most dramatically for Hispanic pupils.

Also encouraging is the finding that the proportion of dropouts who were enrolled in school of some kind increased from 16 percent to nearly one quarter over the five years. It is significant, however, that in each of the years from 45 to 50 percent of the group reported that they were unemployed at the time of the survey. The pervasiveness of this condition suggests that perhaps new approaches are required to solve the ongoing problem of unskilled teenage employment.

APPENDIX

TABLE 31. ENROLLMENT, DROPOUTS AND DROPOUT RATES BY SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA, PA., 1974-78

No.	Name	1977-78 Enrollment	1977-78 Dropouts	1977-78 Dropout Rate	1976-77 Enrollment	1976-77 Dropouts	1976-77 Dropout Rate	1975-76 Enrollment	1975-76 Dropouts	1975-76 Dropout Rate	1974-75 Enrollment	1974-75 Dropouts	1974-75 Dropout Rate	1973-74 Enrollment	1973-74 Dropouts	1973-74 Dropout Rate
101	Bartram	3938	435	11.0	3999	474	11.9	4381	537	12.3	4300	508	11.8	4130	513	12.5
102	West Philadelphia	3181	480	15.1	2899	423	14.6	2676	349	13.0	2894	492	17.0	2971	502	16.9
108	W. P. University City	2756	429	15.6	3144	382	12.3	2981	458	15.4	2958	384	13.0	2787	264	9.4
201	Franklin	1823	373	20.0	1605	319	19.9	1482	470	31.7	1490	390	26.2	1372	422	30.5
203	Penn	2702	515	18.6	2925	554	20.4	2910	463	16.0	2491	385	15.5	1702	383	22.5
205	Parkway	1231	85	6.9	1172	100	8.5	980	56	5.7	867	83	9.6	804	93	11.6
214	Masterman	58	-	-	30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
223	Franklin Learning Ctr.	835	84	10.0	657	97	14.8	595	146	24.5	432	75	17.4	-	-	-
301	South Philadelphia	3418	564	16.5	3573	954	26.7	4184	959	22.9	4043	919	22.7	4095	870	21.3
306	Bok	1468	129	8.8	1358	114	8.4	1165	157	13.5	1198	186	15.5	1239	219	17.7
310	Bartlett	232	18	7.8	281	24	8.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
311	Furness	580	77	13.3	581	51	8.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
333	School for All Ages-NL	CLOSED			41	-	-	39	6	*	-	-	-	-	-	-
401	Gratz	3217	534	16.6	2999	466	15.5	2747	517	18.8	3106	564	18.2	3407	650	19.1
402	Overbrook	3144	385	12.2	3030	334	10.8	3182	362	11.4	3415	456	13.4	4020	535	13.3
406	Dobbins	2194	148	6.7	2145	135	6.3	2113	134	6.3	2105	164	7.8	2103	161	7.7
414	Strawberry Mansion	643	79	12.3	707	71	10.0	485	45	9.3	275	11	4.0	-	-	-
432	Lanberton	428	5	1.2	564	5	0.9	595	10	1.7	413	9	2.2	-	-	-
501	Kensington	1604	456	28.4	1552	432	27.8	1638	474	28.9	1610	466	28.9	1595	521	32.6
502	Edison	1856	377	20.3	1674	524	31.3	1738	535	30.8	1707	613	35.9	1932	757	39.1
516	Mastbaum	1772	150	8.5	1730	130	7.5	1756	170	9.8	1697	167	9.8	1621	174	10.7
601	Central	1916	16	0.8	1805	17	0.9	1743	18	1.0	1570	12	0.8	1554	12	0.8
602	Germantown	3827	455	11.9	3383	435	12.8	3462	471	13.6	3216	693	21.6	3126	625	20.0
603	Roxborough	2095	215	10.3	2074	203	9.8	2231	233	10.4	2223	220	9.8	2239	244	10.9
604	Saul	522	5	1.0	476	8	1.7	486	12	2.5	430	7	1.4	474	8	1.7
605	High School for Girls	2172	18	0.8	2031	9	0.4	1818	6	0.3	1595	9	0.6	1511	13	0.9
606	King	3431	429	12.3	3583	272	7.6	3289	244	7.4	3164	118	3.7	3184	104	3.3
701	Frankford	3169	737	23.3	3143	623	19.8	2943	573	19.5	2827	583	20.6	2955	679	22.9
702	Olney	4218	658	15.6	4131	583	14.1	4228	750	17.8	4509	708	15.7	4569	808	17.7
733	School for All ages	20	3	*	34	7	*	21	4	*	-	-	-	-	-	-
801	Lincoln	3527	257	7.3	3671	277	7.6	3860	282	7.3	3889	287	7.4	3943	302	7.8
802	Northeast	3142	207	6.6	3321	216	5.5	3451	196	5.7	3548	177	5.0	3722	205	5.5
803	Washington	4468	249	5.6	4491	234	5.2	4405	241	5.5	4292	236	5.5	3049	245	8.0
	TOTAL	69,711	8,572	12.3	68,869	8,513	12.4	67,574	8,873	13.1	66,352	8,921	13.4	64,335	9,444	14.6

* Too small to compute reliable percentages.

TABLE 2. DROPOUTS' REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL BY CODED REASONS ON RECORD, PHILADELPHIA, PA. 1978

Respondents' Reasons for Leaving School	Categories of Codes Assigned by Pupil Personnel & Counseling				
	Total	Gov't. Service (01C/01E)	Employment (03E/04A)	Pregnancy (03G/10A)	All Other (0CSA)
Total	1340 100.0	67 100.0	511 100.0	16 100.0	746 100.0
Didn't Like School	265 19.8	14 20.9	108 21.1	3 18.8	140 18.8
Needed to Work	203 15.1	4 6.0	100 19.6	0 0.0	99 13.3
Pregnancy, Child Care, Marriage	186 13.9	1 1.5	42 8.2	12 75.0	131 17.5
Retained in Grade	172 12.8	6 9.0	76 14.9	1 6.2	89 11.9
Personal Problems	167 12.5	6 9.0	61 11.9	0 0.0	100 13.4
Was Dropped (Got Put Out Poor Attendance)	94 7.0	1 1.5	32 6.2	0 0.0	61 8.2
Government Service Armed Forces	53 4.0	27 40.3	9 1.8	0 0.0	17 2.3
To Go to Another School	30 2.2	2 2.9	9 1.8	0 0.0	19 2.5
Courses Not Available, Wasn't Learning	52 3.9	1 1.5	24 4.8	0 0.0	27 3.6
Gangs, Racial Problem	26 1.9	2 2.9	16 3.1	0 0.0	8 1.1
All Other	92 6.7	3 4.5	34 6.6	0 0.0	55 7.4

TABLE 3. DROPOUT STATUS WITHIN ONE YEAR OF LEAVING SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA, PA. 1974-78

	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978
Employed	28.4	21.7	20.9	24.3	25.0
In School, Not Employed	11.1	15.3	20.1	14.9	17.4
In School, Employed	4.9	4.5	5.8	6.0	6.9
Unemployed	42.8	49.2	45.8	46.8	44.6
In Military Service	12.8	9.3	7.4	8.0	6.1
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

TABLE 4. FREQUENCY COUNTS- ALL CATEGORIES

	DROPOUT CATEGORY														
	TOTAL			GOVERNMENT SERVICE			OVER COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE			EMPLOYMENT CERTIFICATE OR EXEMPTION PERMIT			PREGNANCY		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
ALL GRADES	4729	3843	8572	367	94	461	4138	3260	7398	224	403	627	0	86	86
BLACK	3003	2594	5597	286	87	373	2691	2249	4940	26	189	215	0	69	69
HISPANIC	213	183	396	11	4	15	199	166	365	3	8	11	0	5	5
OTHER	1513	1066	2579	70	3	73	1248	845	2093	195	206	401	0	12	12
09TH GRADE	367	285	652	21	15	36	306	190	496	40	70	110	0	10	10
BLACK	285	228	513	20	15	35	259	156	415	6	48	54	0	9	9
HISPANIC	2	2	4	0	0	0	2	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
OTHER	80	55	135	1	0	1	45	32	77	34	22	56	0	1	1
10TH GRADE	2149	1776	3925	143	53	196	1857	1402	3259	149	277	426	0	44	44
BLACK	1298	1160	2458	112	48	160	1169	952	2121	17	127	144	0	33	33
HISPANIC	123	105	228	5	3	8	115	90	205	3	7	10	0	5	5
OTHER	728	511	1239	26	2	28	573	360	933	129	143	272	0	6	6
11TH GRADE	1334	1035	2369	124	18	142	1177	936	2113	33	54	87	0	27	27
BLACK	860	705	1565	96	17	113	761	649	1410	3	14	17	0	25	25
HISPANIC	58	50	108	6	1	7	52	48	100	0	1	1	0	0	0
OTHER	416	280	696	22	0	22	364	239	603	30	39	69	0	2	2
12TH GRADE	879	747	1626	79	8	87	798	732	1530	2	2	4	0	5	5
BLACK	560	501	1061	53	7	65	502	492	994	0	0	0	0	2	2
HISPANIC	30	26	56	0	0	0	30	26	56	0	0	0	0	0	0
OTHER	289	220	509	21	1	22	266	214	480	2	2	4	0	3	3

TABLE 5. PROPORTION OF DROPOUTS IN EACH CATEGORY BY RACE BY GRADE (N = 8572)

		DROPOUT CATEGORY			
	TOTAL	GOVERNMENT SERVICE	OVER COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE	EMPLOYMENT CERTIFICATE OR EXEMPTION PERMIT	PREGNANCY
	PER CENT	PER CENT	PER CENT	PER CENT	PER CENT
ALL GRADES	100.0	5.4	86.3	7.3	1.0
BLACK	65.3	4.4	57.6	2.5	0.8
HISPANIC	4.6	0.2	4.3	0.1	0.1
OTHER	30.1	0.9	24.4	4.7	0.1
09TH GRADE	7.6	0.4	5.8	1.3	0.1
BLACK	6.0	0.4	4.8	0.6	0.1
HISPANIC	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
OTHER	1.6	0.0	0.9	0.7	0.0
10TH GRADE	45.8	2.3	38.0	5.0	0.5
BLACK	28.7	1.9	24.7	1.7	0.4
HISPANIC	2.7	0.1	2.4	0.1	0.1
OTHER	14.5	0.3	10.9	3.2	0.1
11TH GRADE	27.6	1.7	24.7	1.0	0.3
BLACK	18.3	1.3	16.4	0.2	0.3
HISPANIC	1.3	0.1	1.2	0.0	0.0
OTHER	8.1	0.3	7.0	0.8	0.0
12TH GRADE	19.0	1.0	17.8	0.0	0.1
BLACK	12.4	0.8	11.6	0.0	0.0
HISPANIC	0.7	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
OTHER	5.9	0.3	5.6	0.0	0.0

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